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Buddhists and AIDS

The Work of ACCESS Group, LA Buddhist AIDS Project, MAITRI, and SF Zen Center Hospice

“What is going on is very important”
The Buddhist AIDS Project of Los Angeles
by Steve Peskind

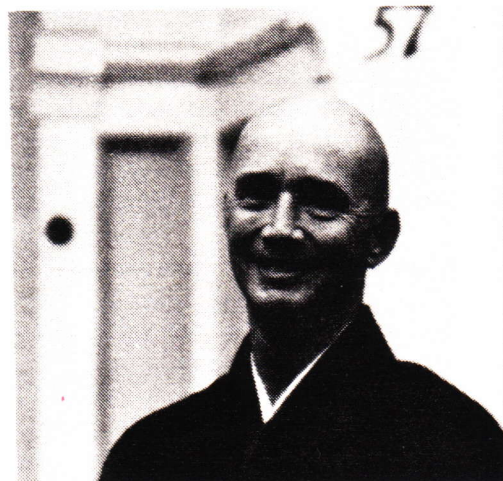
Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, AIDS, is of enormous concern to all of us, especially those in high risk communities, their loved ones, health care professionals, counselors, and others working with AIDS patients. Although this epidemic is in its eighth year and shows little sign of diminishing, most of the public at large and even many who are living with AIDS lack basic information. A lot of information is available and its dissemination can reduce risks, irrational fears, and misconceptions, and nurture health and a more skillful response to this stressful time. The Buddhist AIDS Project was formed in Los Angeles in March 1987 as a network of individuals, sanghas, and agencies, to inform and encourage the Buddhist Community in responding to this epidemic, and to help and reach out to anyone affected by AIDS.

Steve Peskind, a student of the Very Ven. Kalu Rinpoche, is the Coordinator of the Buddhist AIDS Project. He has been involved in AIDS education and counseling for seven years, and is presently the Director of the Laguna Shanti Project, which provides free support services to persons with life-threatening illness and grief. Ken McLeod, one of the senior Western students of Kalu Rinpoche and the resident teacher of KDC in Los Angeles, is “Spiritual Consultant.” Lama McLeod has studied and practiced Buddhism for 16 years, including two traditional three-year retreats.

The Project began when Ken McLeod invited Lama Yeshe Dorje, a Nyingma doctor and assistant to His Holiness the Dalai Lama to offer a healing ceremony in Los Angeles for persons with AIDS. A month later, a video, *Exploring the Heart of Healing in AIDS*, with Stephen Levine and Ram Dass, was shown and provided the basis for discussing of issues of grief and dying, spiritual practice and service in the context of working with AIDS. (See pages 4-5) From these two events, the response to developing a Buddhist AIDS Project was positive, and the Project’s first general meeting was held in May.

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Gay Buddhist Activism
Hartford Street Zen Center Plans AIDS Hospice
by Tensho David Schneider



Issan Dorsey, head teacher at Hartford Street Zen Center

Photo by Gladys Hansen

When Issan Dorsey ran the kitchen of the San Francisco Zen Center, he used to say he didn’t know how to cook. He’d meet with the meal prep crew before going to work, smoke a cigarette, drink coffee, maybe pass cookies around, and ask for ideas. “Read me that recipe—not the amounts or anything, I just want to get an idea what kind of stuff goes in.” Two and a half chaotic hours later, a soul satisfying meal for 90 people would be served.

Though he ran the kitchens at each of the Zen Center’s three practice locations, and worked with food for years, Issan carefully avoided learning how to cook. The Directors of each center would worry during his term; they invariably loved the food, but they were never able to instill in him reverence for the idea of a budget (or any other idea of reverence, for that matter.) “I cook good food, spend what I have to spend, and

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that's my budget, not the other way around."

A decade later, Issan finds himself Teacher-in-Residence at the Hartford Street Zen Center—a thriving meditation center in San Francisco's Castro district. He is also fiercely intent on opening a hospice for AIDS patients in the building next door, the first Buddhist hospice in America and only the second residential hospice in all of San Francisco, a city known internationally for its progressive attitudes and programs for AIDS patients. In both these endeavors his 'don't-know' attitude serves him well, keeping him flexible and open to unlikely connections, and protecting him from the forbidding problems inherent in operating either a meditation center or a hospice.

Granted, there are lots of meditation groups in the United States and the world, but none of the others is quite like Hartford Street. From the beginning, practitioners there had a strong sense of their historical importance and chronicled events carefully. The first newsletter, June 1983, contains a detailed account of how the Hartford Street Zen Center came to be.

Mr. Arthur White tells us that the building at 57 Hartford Street—a single family house with eight rooms on three upper floors and a basement, handsome but unremarkable on a block of many such houses—was the home of the San Francisco Dharmadhatu from 1973 to 1979. The group used the large, wood-paneled basement as a shrine room, while the resident teacher and students lived upstairs. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche visited the center and blessed it with rice and invocations, in the traditional Tibetan way. The space was also blessed by His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa on one of his visits to San Francisco.

Eventually the Dharmadhatu moved to larger quarters, but one of the residents stayed, delighted to find himself at the geographical center of an explosively developing gay community. He and another resident began to discuss the difficulties they felt in practicing Buddhism, particularly Zen, and being gay. While sexual orientation had never been a reason for excluding anyone from any activity at the San Francisco Zen Center, several gay men felt less than comfortable with what they perceived as an overwhelmingly 'straight' vibe there.

Word went out via one of the gay papers and a surprisingly large meeting of similarly concerned men coalesced in April of 1980. Issan Dorsey attended the meeting, not as someone particularly disaffected with Zen Center zen, but as someone who had found a way to practice Buddhism, be gay, and remain unconflicted. He went, also, having discussed the issue with his teacher, Richard Baker-roshi. Baker-roshi, in turn, had just met with Robert Aitken-roshi, who had questioned him closely about how he was making Buddhist practice available to the burgeoning gay and lesbian community. Baker-roshi pointed to Issan and said "This is our contribution to the gay community." He and Aitken-roshi encouraged Issan to attend the meeting, find out the concerns, and be supportive.

The meeting turned into a series, held every Tuesday evening at 57 Hartford Street. The group at first called itself The Gay Buddhist Club, later changed the name to Maitri. "At first we'd just sit around and smoke cigarettes and complain about how hard it was to practice and be gay," recalls Issan. "Gradually, we began to meditate for a while before our discussions, and pretty soon there was a Buddha and incense and flowers...We've come a long way."

The group grew steadily, hosted many inspiring speakers, including Allen Ginsberg, Susan Murcott, and Baker-roshi. On December 8, 1981, the group formally opened a zendo at 57 Hartford Street, with Issan as 'spiritual advisor.' Today, the Hartford Street Zendo is a defiantly independent affiliate of the San Francisco Zen Center.

Of all the people attending the first Gay Buddhist Club meeting, none trod a more colorful path there than Issan. Born and raised in Santa Barbara well over fifty years ago, Issan—then Tommy—ran away to sea at the age of 18. He and his boyfriend were summarily discharged from the service for failing, as Issan puts it "to ask permission to be a Navy couple." Inherently outrageous, Issan put his talents to commercial use and began a long career as a female impersonator. Touring around the country performing took its toll, and he fell into a life of drugs, alcoholism, and sexual debauchery. In his first lecture as Head Monk at Tassajara, a lecture in which the monk recounts his or her personal history, Issan confidently told the assembly that he had fallen off more stages in Chicago than they even knew existed.

Such a life was not always humorous: Lenny Bruce gave him his first shot of heroin, and Issan vividly recalls waking up in a station wagon one time, on the way to the East River in New York. His friends, certain that he had overdosed, were heading to the docks to dispose of the body. "You've heard of being in the gutter, well, this *body* has been in the gutter."

Issan survived his thirteen years as a female impersonator and drug addict. He graduated from one anti-establishment style to another smoothly, and when the hippie movement blossomed in San Francisco, Issan was there, running an urban commune.

An all night adventure led him one morning to Sokoji temple, where he encountered Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, and zen meditation. "Dirty, high, barefoot, long-hair, beads... the whole mess," Issan sighs, remembering how he presented himself to the man who would become his Zen teacher.

Nonetheless, something clicked for Issan, and he became a regular practitioner. He went to Tassajara, Zen Mountain Center, to do a training period, and eventually took up a floating sort of residence among Zen Center's practice centers. He was ordained as a priest (Tokudo Ceremony) in 1975, and served as Head Monk at Tassajara in 1979.

Issan's most unique contribution to Zen Center was his ability to act as a buffer, or channel, between the rather severe countenance of the Center itself, and the assorted strange or deranged people who often approached it. During his years in

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"What one takes in by contemplation one pours out in love."
—Meister Eckhart

*"...the flavor of this practice is taking care of the smallest
details of our daily life."* —Zen Master Dogen

*I slept and dreamt that life was joy
I awoke and saw that life was service
I acted and behold, service was joy*
—Tagore

Gay Buddhist Activism

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show business there was very little craziness that Issan didn't see or experience. When the full moon would attract the homeless, despairing, mumbling, and unkempt to Zen Center's front stairs, it was Issan who could be with them most solicitously. When zen students would find themselves spiralling downward in inexplicable depressions, they often turned to Issan for support. When crisis erupted in people's lives—trouble with drugs, or relationships, or legal matters—Issan would understand. He'd been there.

When the Zen Center itself experienced a painful schism in 1983, Issan remained in close touch with both sides. He declared himself Baker-roshi's student, but also took a position on Zen Center's board of directors, and worked for reconciliation. He eventually left San Francisco to work intensively with Baker-roshi in Santa Fe.

During his absence, the Hartford Street Zen Center decided they needed Issan, if they were going to make the practice there equal to the challenges they were facing. They raised money, wrote to Santa Fe, and after eight months away, Issan returned to San Francisco and took up residence at Hartford Street.

Since coming back, Issan has stressed steady, daily, mindful practice for the residents and members of the community. "Careful attention to the details of daily life" is a kind of watchword for him these days. Living as he does in the midst of the gay community, Issan is also a constant witness to daily death. Students, donors, and a horrifying number of the practicing community around Hartford Street have fallen prey to AIDS. Issan has done funerals, been on panels, and led

retreats for members of the larger gay community—all focused on responses to the epidemic. "These kids are dying all around me," he says, looking around. "I want to take care of them." To that end he has committed himself to creating a Buddhist hospice.

As of this writing, the Hartford Street Zen Center has been providing 24 hour in-house care for several weeks for one of the students dying from AIDS. Hartford Street is already seen as a collection point for medical supplies; when someone connected with the community dies of AIDS, the friends and family are bringing the wheelchairs, beds, and other supplies to Issan. Issan has secured a promise from his next door neighbors to sell their house, if he can find a buyer and he is actively looking. In the mean time, they are paying the neighbors whatever they can scrape together each month, to hold the space. A hospice training program is underway at the San Francisco Zen Center; Issan participates in that, and members of the program come to Hartford Street to get actual experience. As Philip Whalen said "Issan is just going to do a hospice and that's the end of it."

The temptation arises to see Issan as a kind of local Mother Teresa. Not to deny that in the least (though perhaps Avalokitesvara would be closer to my image of him) I suspect his primary motivation is quite simple. "The Path is under your feet," he says, in his lectures. There are a lot of sick people on Issan Dorsey's path. He is going to help them out.

Tensho David Schneider is a writer, calligrapher, Hellerwork body worker, Zen priest, and Vajrayana practitioner in San Francisco.